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ABSTRACT

Efforts to individualize the secondary school English curriculum (Poway High School, California) have led to the development of a program of approximately 20 non-graded courses in literature, language, and composition which allows students to choose their own courses and to make decisions about content, structure, and methods of evaluation in a personalized learning environment. Small student-centered discussion groups, flexible scheduling, and an open curriculum with no pre-set list of requirements place the students at the center of the learning experience and develop their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills. The teacher becomes a resource person who guides individualized learning and promotes communication. (JM)

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Communication Arts: Individualization Through Curriculum, Content, and the Small Group

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At last winter's English Teacher Specialist Conference at Asilomar (November, 1968), James Moffett defined the nature of English as "communication through listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking." Defined in this way, small groups and individualized instruction should be given greater attention by those teachers of English who yearn for a more effective learning environment and a more relevant curriculum, content and methodology.

Five years ago Poway High School, a flexibly scheduled school, defined English as James Moffett did. In an effort to individualize the curriculum, the Communication Arts Department at Poway offers approximately twenty non-graded semester courses that emphasize the speaking, reading, and writing aspects of English. The unifying strands of language, composition, and literature are evident in each course. But now the specific needs and interests of students relevant to those strands are given individual emphasis. With five or six courses to choose from in each area of speaking, reading, and writing, students of varying abilities select courses that relate to themselves and in which they can succeed.

Fundamentals of Communication, Oral Communication 1 and 2, Drama 1 and 2, Competitive Speech and Debate, provide a range of electives in the area of speaking. Fundamentals of Writing, Composition, Journalism 1 and 2, English Usage and Composition, and Creative Writing offer opportunities for success to students of limited abilities as well as challenges for the more able students. World Literature 1 and 2, English Literature 1 and 2, Contemporary Literature, American Literature 1 and 2, Reading Skill Development, and Reading Seminar cover a wide range of literature for students with different tastes and reading

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FRANK J. BARONE, chairman of communication arts at Poway High School, was selected last year as an English Teacher Specialist in the state's current in-service training project. Mr. Barone is a consultant in the fields of small group instruction and flexible scheduling, and has long been interested in student centered approaches to literature and composition work in the high school.

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talent. These twenty or so non-graded, elective, semester courses are the first step in the individualized program at Poway High School.

Maximum Flexibility

Once the curriculum opens up, the content within each course offering broadens in scope and increases its flexibility. No one text book confines either teacher or student. No one anthology limits learning. The whole field of communications, the entire library, the resource centers stocked with extensive paperbacks supply the content for each aspect of Moffett's definition of English. Content now goes beyond the preferences of the instructor or the selections of the particular publisher. Since the scope of whatever it is that constitutes English is so broad, and since content is a matter of selection anyway, the student individualizes his own learning by selecting his own content. Students do not have to "wait until next year" to read a book or a play, or to practice a certain writing technique. Nor do students with reading difficulties have to follow what everyone else in the class is reading, sometimes following at great distances, if at all. Teachers no longer have to be restricted to a pre-set list of titles, speeches, or composition exercises either arbitrarily arranged by the department chairman or dictated by publisher or university. Given the broad scope of English content, it would seem that it does not make too much difference what students or teachers use to improve listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking.

By giving students choices to make regarding content, the Communication Arts teachers at Poway encourage individualized learning. By having a wide range of content to draw upon, the teachers themselves become more effective resource persons. Every time we give alternatives, every time we allow choices, we increase the opportunities for the student's involvement in his own education; that is, we individualize instruction. In effect, we put the student at the center of learning. Curriculum and content now fit the student, rather than forcing the student to fit the rigid molds of curriculum and content.

Student Centered Small Groups

Granted this student-centered curriculum and student-oriented content, individualized learning needs another ingredient. It needs a learning environment that will not only continue the personalization initiated through curriculum and content, but also motivate further individualized learning.

The small group, by its very nature, stimulates communication, the key word in our definition of English. And the key word in communica-

tion is listening. No effective communication ever occurs where listening is deficient. Listening is at the heart of the small group. The listening environment makes the small group an effective method for personally involving students in their own education, allowing each group member to participate, to think, to share his learnings, experiences, feelings, and opinions in a more comfortable atmosphere. Thus, all the elements of our definition of English as communication come into focus within the small group. Students listen to each other, speak with each other, and externalize their reading, writing, and thinking experiences.

Within the small group, group members make decisions on how to structure their courses, what content to include, and the methods of evaluation. In addition to group decisions, individuals elect to work within their needs and interests through personal contracts or other alternatives of content, presentation, and evaluation. Here, again, the student is at the center of learning. Subject matter, the approaches to and evaluation of subject matter, take second place to the object of education —the student. Any movement, any discussion on individualizing instruction focuses ultimately on the importance of each student. Students come to feel they are important within the small group where their identities are recognized, where they are accepted for being themselves, not for what they achieve, where cooperation holds more value than competition.

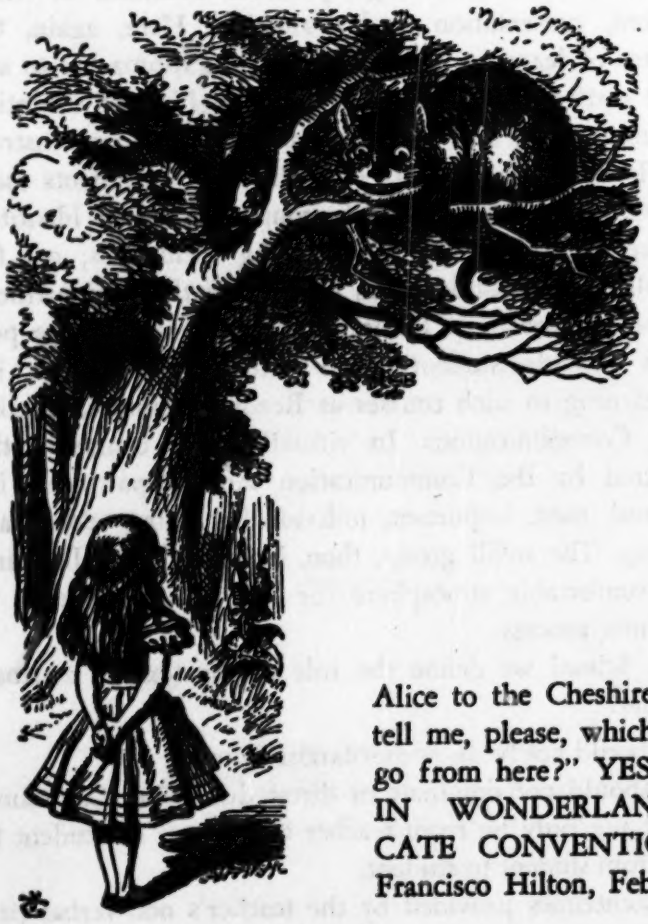
The personal contract, optional levels of achievement, and the performance curriculum provide students with further decisions in individualizing their learning in such courses as Reading Seminar, English Literature, and Oral Communications. In virtually every course of the twenty electives offered by the Communication Arts Department, individual instruction and, more important, individual learning takes place within the small group. The small group, then, by providing a listening environment and a comfortable atmosphere for communication tends to individualize the learning process.

At Poway High School we define the role of the teacher in small groups. We assume that:

1. The teacher should not be an authoritarian figure.
2. The teacher should not dominate or direct discussion. Communication should not only be from teacher to student, or student to teacher, but from student to student.
3. The silence sometimes provided by the teacher's non-verbal participation is an active element for thinking in the small group.
4. The teacher is a resource person whom students may draw upon for information.
5. The successful teacher is the one whom students come to depend

upon less and less as they assume responsibility for their own learning.

By means of our varied, elective curriculum, by exploring the entire content of English, and by using the small group as one method of focus the student at the center of instruction, the Communication Arts Department provides the students at Poway High School with an individualized approach to learning.



Alice to the Cheshire Cat: "Can you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" YES! To ENGLISH IN WONDERLAND, the 1970 CATE CONVENTION at the San Francisco Hilton, February 6-7-8.